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Coping With Allergies

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While spring is often known as "hay fever season" - for reasons that are obvious if you are reading this with a clogged-up nose - different pollens appear at different times throughout the year. In general, trees usually pollinate in early spring, grasses in late spring and summer, weeds in late summer and fall. Mold can also cause allergies from spring to late fall - but in warm climates, or if they grow indoors they can cause problems all year round. Other notable year-round allergies are dust mites (microscopic creatures that live among dust particles) and dog and cat dander.

Additionally, a small percentage of people are allergic to certain foods, food additives, medicines, latex (as in gloves etc.) and insect stings. These allergies can cause nasty symptoms such as hives, skin rashes, and swelling of the eyelids, tongue, mouth, throat, hands and feet. A severe and life threatening allergic reaction known as anaphylaxis often occurs when people who are particularly sensitive are exposed to penicillin, stinging insects, shell fish or nuts. These substances must be completely avoided by people who are severely allergic to them.

If your allergies are seasonal, you are probably allergic to an outdoor substance. If that seems to be the case try to avoid exercising during the morning hours when pollen counts are highest. Keep windows closed and air conditioning on at home and work, in the car and at the gym. Be aware that the pollen counts are highest on warm, dry, breezy days and lowest on cold, wet ones. Of course, not everyone wants the weatherman dictating their workout schedule. If you are going to go out, using an antihistamine beforehand will minimize symptoms.

If you have allergy problems year round, you may be allergic to something indoors and you will have to reduce your exposure to the triggers causing your allergies. Don a mask and clean your house weekly or better yet, let someone else vacuum and dust for you. Don't forget to use a vacuum cleaner that filters its emissions, otherwise you could just be spreading particles into the air. If your basement doubles as an exercise room, you may want to invest in a dehumidifier to keep things dry. Another recommended investment is a high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filter to reduce allergens. And if a pet is the problem, decrease the dander by banning your four legged friend from the bedroom and wash her once a week.

If despite all your lifestyle adjustments, you still suffer from allergy symptoms, you may need to consider other treatment options. When symptoms are mild or occasional there are over-the-counter antihistamines that can provide relief and tame coughs, itchy eyes and sneezes. Decongestant sprays will give speedy relief to clogged noses but cause

rebound congestion if used for more than a few days at a time. Finally, a spritz of cromolyn sodium, available as Masalcom, may actually prevent allergic reactions, as long as you begin taking it a few weeks before hay fever season. A pharmacist will help you choose the appropriate medication and explain side effects. Natural remedies include; Vitamin C which helps stabilize most cells by lowering histamine levels and improving overall symptoms. Relaxation (Abdominal breathing, Yoga and Tai Chi) improves digestion and cleans toxins from the liver. It makes the immune system less reactive and improves overall symptoms. Omega 3 fatty acids (in flaxseed oil and cold-water fish) act as an anti-inflammatory to decrease allergic reaction.

If your allergies are persistent, your doctor may prescribe one of the newer non-sedating antihistamines. They are just as effective as OTC versions without making you sleepy or drying out your mouth. Those with the stuffiest of noses can consider a nasal steroid spray such as Florase, Nasocort, or Beconase. These drugs can take three to ten days to kick in, so it's key to start before symptoms get out of control.

If pills and sprays are not working for your histamines, you may want to consider allergy shots. They are designed to raise your body's tolerance to allergens. Research suggests the shots have long-term, perhaps even permanent, benefits. A full course of immunotherapy is intensive: weekly shots for four to six months, then a shot every two to three weeks for a few years.

You may not be able to rid yourself of symptoms entirely, but careful housekeeping and the right treatments can make living with them more bearable.

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